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# A Decision Heuristic for Party Identification: New British and German Data and a New Understanding for a Classic Concept

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# A Decision Heuristic for Party Identification: New British and German Data and a New Understanding for a Classic Concept*

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**ABSTRACT**

The concept party identification lies at the heart of much research on political preferences and behavior in established democracies. Drawing on data obtained from the British Household Panel Survey (1991-99) and the German Socio-Economic Panel Survey (1984-1998), we offer a fresh approach to the concept. Party identification is a stance that people take towards the political parties. They apply a consistent rule –a decision heuristic –persistently returning to the same preference year after year or behaving haphazardly, moving with no clear pattern among the choices. Most take a definitively negative stance towards one of the parties and a positive stance towards the other major party. Of these, about half display behavior that reflects a psychological commitment and about half are as likely as not to pick that party when asked. For most people, party identification is neither a loyalty, as conceived by traditional understanding associated with the Michigan –nor a calculated choice –as offered by rational choice theory –but a way to situate oneself persistently in relation to the relatively distant objects of politics.

Key words: Party Identification; decision heuristic; panel surveys; British and German politics

The concept party identification lies at the heart of the analysis of political behavior in established democracies, as well it should. Voting is the most frequent political act. Relatively few citizens of these countries engage in other forms of political participation. As people decide how to cast their ballots, they reflect on the political parties, whose candidates, organizations, messages, and labels structure democratic political competition. Perceptions of the political parties and choices made to prefer one or another of them guide electoral decisions.

The path-breaking research of the Michigan School, the group of political scientists and social psychologists at the University of Michigan who organized the first survey based analyses of the American electorate, brought party identification to prominence. *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960) provides the defining statements, Converse's "Of Time and Partisan Stability" (1969, and see also Converse 1976) elaborates the theoretical implications, and *The New American Voter* (Miller and Shanks, 1996) offers the most recent full statement.[1] In this theoretical orientation, the concept connotes a persistent psychological attachment to a political party. As the school expanded,[2] party identification guided the study of political behavior.

Those who would offer an alternative theoretical perspective for the study of political behavior confront the conceptualization of party identification. Consider rational choice theory, the primary rival in this subject area. Members of this research school replace the defining notion of psychological

[1] The concept resonated with an already established image of persistent and well-established attachments to political parties, such that each electoral choice was less a decision than an extension of an existing practice. See Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), Key (1961:65-66), Key and Munger (1959), Lane (1959), and Lane and Sears (1964). For earlier work by members of the Michigan school that uses the concept, see Belknap and Campbell (1951-52) and Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954). Key and Lane may be said to have joined with Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes to establish the "behavioralist" mode of studying American political behavior.

[2] The founders used party identification to analyze mass politics in other democracies, for Britain, Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974), for Norway, Campbell and Valen (1961), and for France, Converse and Dupeux (1962), Converse and Pierce (1985, 1986). This led to a voluminous literature that includes other applications and discussions of proper conceptualization, measures and theoretical utility. JSTOR cites 200 articles between 1985 and the middle of 2001, which contain the word party identification. Other examples focusing on the United States include Brody and Rothenberg (1980), Cassell (1993), Franklin and Jackson (1983), Gerber and Green (1998) Green and Palmquist (1990, 1994), Jackson (1975), Kiewiet (1983), Markus, Nuemann, and Mackuen (2000), Miller (1991), Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976), Page and Jones (1979), and Schickler and Green (1993-94). Because this paper examines data from Britain and Germany, it is useful to highlight studies of the concept in those countries. For other examples on Britain, see Abramson (1992), Cassell (1999), Clarke, Stewart, and Whitely (1997), Crewe (1976), Crewe, Särlvick, and Art (1977), Heath Jowell, and Curtice (1991), Heath and Pierce (1992), Johnston (1992), Rose and McAllister (1986), Rose and McAllister (1990), Sanders and Brynin (1999), Särlvick and Crewe (1983), Zuckerman (1989), and Zuckerman and Feldman (1982). For examples on Germany, see Anderson and Zelle (1998), Baker, Dalton, and Hildebrandt (1981), Falter, Schoen, and Caballero (nd), Falter and Rattinger (1982), Kaase (1976), Klingemann and Wattenberg (1992), Norpoth (1978, 1984), Shively (1972), and Zelle (1985, 1998). Studies that explore the concept in more than one context and/or in more abstract terms include Barnes (1989), Barnes, Jennings, Inglehart, and Farrah (1988), Converse and Pierce (1985), Leithner (1997), LeDuc (1979), Schickler and Green (1997), Schmitt and Holmberg (1995), Sinnott (1998), and Zuckerman (1989, 1991).

attachment. In its place, party preference is the result of people's reasoned calculations which view the parties as alternatives in a choice set and which link the selection to variations in policy preferences and perceptions of self-interest (see for example Achen, 1992, Downs 1957, Fiorina 1981, Key 1966, and Kiewiet 1983).[3]

Studies of party identification offer some of the best scholarship in political science. They address theoretically driven puzzles that are of substantive importance. The analyses apply to newly forming as well as established democracies, and they address dynamic patterns as well as single points in times. They help to develop numerous research techniques, ranging from mass election surveys to modes of data analysis.

What justifies our decision to add to this corpus? The analysis of fresh data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP) provide new substantive and theoretical insights.[4] The results challenge fundamental claims of both the Michigan school and rational choice theory. Using what Simon (1998:118-9) calls "abduction," i.e. a mode of analysis that moves from the examination of observed phenomena to explanatory hypotheses, we offer party preference as a stance taken towards the parties; it is neither a psychological attachment nor a calculation. We show that a minority in an electorate identifies with a political party. Even fewer people view the parties as alternative political choices, and their party preferences do not display evidence of rational calculations that seek to defend or expand people's pocketbooks or the general economy. Instead most everyone seems to apply a simple general heuristic: decide now by applying the same procedure used before. People take a stance towards the parties and then repeat the choices that follow from that orientation. This decision rule produces four outcomes: a.) *never* select one or more of the parties; choose one of the parties b.) *always* or c.) *haphazardly*; d.) select each of the options *haphazardly*.

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[3] Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) marks the first application of rational choice theory to the study of political behavior. The debates between the behavioralists and the rationalists have conditioned the study of political behavior for half a century. Both groups pushed aside a third rival, the Columbia school, which emphasized the social context of political behavior. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) mark the beginnings of this approach, and see Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) for a recent full elaboration.

[4] Unlike the many sociologists and economists, very few political scientists have worked with these data. For exceptions, see Kotler-Berkowitz (2001), Johnston and Pattie (2000), Ulrich (2001), Sanders and Brynin (1999), and Zuckerman and Kotler-Berkowitz (1998). Zuckerman and Brynin are also completing several related papers: one which will study transitions across the political parties and other elements of the dynamic qualities of partisanship and another that will locate the effects of social contexts, especially household members, on the dynamics of party identification at the individual level. In addition, Zuckerman is working with graduate students in the Departments of Political Science and Sociology at Brown University on related papers: a comparison of the dynamics of party identification among West Germans, East Germans, foreigners, and immigrants (with Josip Dasovic), an analysis of the transmission of partisan preferences across generations within households (with Jennifer Fitzgerald and Leslie Kilgore), and a comparison of the politicization of immigrants in the United States and Germany (with Catherine Bueker and Josip Dasovic).

Never and always imply uniform behavior. Haphazard behavior indicates a random process; it implies that the rule followed is a coin toss. Both offer simple rules, and most people apply these heuristics to orient themselves towards the political parties. Furthermore, social contexts modify or reinforce these recurrent decisions, by raising or lowering the frequency of selecting a party at one point in time and, therefore, over time. In the sections that follow, we describe the two surveys, set out the alternative theoretical perspectives, examine the results of several analyses, and draw the general implications of our results.

## BHPS and GSOEP as Sources for the Analysis of Party Identification

Consider the two data sets more closely.[5] Both survey large numbers of people over many years, examining representative samples of both populations. We explore the nine waves of BHPS, 1991-99, which contain the responses of more than 5000 Britons; each cross-section includes approximately 9000 respondents. GSOEP'S fifteen waves (1984-1998) provide our second data source. The total number of persons surveyed in each wave always exceeds 12000, an exceptionally large number in comparison with other national surveys of any kind, and more than 3000 persons are interviewed in all fourteen waves. The studies question everyone in the household sixteen years of age and older. Both provide information on multiple levels of analysis: aggregate, social categories, household, and individual. They offer a rich array of questions on jobs, education, health, residential mobility, political interest, social and political values, as well as other elements of social, economic, and political life. In both cases, researchers follow people who move into their new households and interview all adults present there as well, thereby partially obviating the problem of over sampling especially stable respondents.[6] In addition, both BHPS and GSOEP contain weighting variables that enable the panel surveys to serve as representative samples of the two populations. Together, the surveys provide the material for a fine-grained analysis of the dynamics of party preferences at the individual and aggregate levels.

Fortunately for our purposes, each wave of each survey provides information on party identification.[7] Indeed, BHPS and GSOEP provide the most extensive and detailed array of data at the individual level

[5] Full descriptions of the surveys may be obtained from the web-sites of the surveys' home institutions, the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex and Das Deutsche Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW Berlin). For the BHPS access www://iser.essex.ac.uk, and for the GSOEP go to www.diw.de/english/sop/index.html. We thank each of the institutions for making the data available. They bear no responsibility for our analyses.

[6] To be precise, the surveys follow respondents who move, but both have a higher rate of losing contact with the poor, those who are in temporary housing, and people who move frequently.

[7] The GSOEP data on party identification for 1984 are not reliable. The distributions resemble no other year and, therefore, fail a test for predictive validity. They include the responses of immigrants as well as Germans. As a result, that year has been excluded from the analysis. The results obtained from the panel data show slightly lower

available anywhere. How do the surveys define the concept? Each offers a multi-dimensional measure, which avoids some critical problems and allows for comparisons across the two cases.

- Here are BHPS's questions: "Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?" If the answer is "no," the respondent is then asked, "Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?" Those who say yes to either question are classified as having a party identification. In turn, they are provided a list of political parties so they can specify their preference.
- The English translation of GSOEP's questions reads: "Many people in the Federal Republic of West Germany[8] are inclined to a certain political party, although from time to time they vote for another political party. What about you: Are you inclined--generally speaking--to a particular party?" Those who answer in the affirmative are then given a list of the political parties and asked to specify their preference.[9]
- Both surveys assess the strength or intensity of the preference. In Britain, the question distinguishes among those who have "very strong," "moderate," and "not very strong" preferences. In Germany, the levels of strength vary among "very weak," "weak," "moderate," "strong," and "very strong" (where our analysis merges very weak and weak into one category and strong and very strong into another). This suggests a scale with four categories of strength: 0 for those with no party identification, 1 for those who are very weak or weak (Germany) or not very strong (Britain), 2 for moderates, and 3 for strong or very strong (Germany) or very strong (Britain). In our analysis the indicators are treated as if they define an interval measure.

Note the value of these measures. Because the parties are not named until the respondent affirms a partisan preference, these questions avoid problems of instrumentation that are associated with the traditional measure.[10] Both also ask the respondents to describe past behavior, without prejudging the issue of psychological attachment. In addition, the strong similarity between the two measures allows us to compare the results in the two countries. Both sets of questions tap the same concept.

Consider also the strengths of these surveys compared to other data on stability and change in partisanship. No other panel survey encompasses so many years; several examine multiple points in the

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percentages supporting a party in each year when compared to the results obtained from the BHPS and GSOEP annual surveys.

[8] After 1990, the question refers to "Germany." Note that because only West Germans are found in all the waves of the panel, our analysis does not include East Germans.

[9] This question closely resembles the one used in the German national election and other political surveys, and the marginal results match these data as well (see Schickler and Green 1997:463 and Zelle 1998:70).

[10] Most traditional measures contain wording like the following: "Generally speaking do you think of yourself as an X, Y, or Z?," where the letters indicated the names of particular political parties. This question implies identification and contributes a specific answer to the question, thereby prompting a response.

same year, and all others contain smaller samples.[11] Because BHPS and GSOEP do not tap party identification only at the high points of electoral cycles, political campaigns do not much influence the responses. These surveys are superb sources for a detailed analysis of party identification.

The data contain evidence for various theoretical perspectives on party identification: age, measures of social class (occupation, education, and subjective identification); religion (identification and attendance at services), economic perceptions and concerns; membership in trade unions, and political interest. Potential problems of endogeneity keep us from relating the dynamics of party preferences to patterns of change in policy goals or electoral choice.[12]

Finally, differences between the two countries suggest how variations in political structures might influence partisan preferences.[13] Britain's long history of democratic rule stands in contrast to Germany's pock marked experience. As important, during the years of BHPS, political power in Britain moved from the Conservatives (victors in 1992) to Labour (who returned to power in 1997). In Germany, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) controlled the national government for all but the last year of the panel survey, when the Social Democratic Party (SPD) rose to the top. Also, German Re-Unification occurred in 1990, allowing the analysis to examine the effects of this transformation on partisan preferences. In sum, the surveys provide an exceptionally useful set of information on partisan preferences and support over many years in Germany and Britain.

## Theoretical Perspectives on the Dynamics of Party Identification

Given the concept's intellectual history, presentation of the relevant theoretical sources should begin with the Michigan school and the response of rational choice theory. We then present an effort to merge the two approaches. After that, we offer our theoretical alternative that conceives of party identification as a decision heuristic.

### *Party identification as a psychological attachment*

Consider the fundamental claim of Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes, and their colleagues: *party identification is a psychological attachment to a political party whose stability and strength increase*

[11] Schickler and Green (1997) review nine relevant examples.

[12] Beginning with Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974), the literature has debated whether one can meaningfully distinguish party identification and electoral decisions in European democracies. For our contributions, see Sanders and Brynin (1999), Zuckerman (1989, 1991) and Zuckerman and Kotler-Berkowitz (1998). The issue is not directly relevant to this paper.

[13] Cross-national differences with regard to party identification appeared with the first applications outside the United States (a point that may be found in most if not all of the sources cited in footnote 2 above). Bowler and Lanoue (1996), Bowler, Lanoue, and Savoie (1994), Coleman (1996), and Uslaner (1990) also develop the consequences of variations in political structure on differences in party identification.

*with exposure to elections.* Citing reference group theory and equating party and religious identification (see for example Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960:162 and Miller and Shanks 1996:120), this theoretical school expects persistent adherence to a particular party; conversions are infrequent. Converse (1969:148) formalized the argument, proposing a model with four elements: 1) a *learning* process, the basic increments in partisan loyalties shown by the individuals over their life cycles as a direct function of their continuing experience with the party system; 2) a *resistance* phenomenon, representing the declining ease of learning as a function of the absolute age at which the individuals commence their experience within the system; 3) a *transmission* process, capturing whatever vicissitudes may surround the transfer of partisan feeling from one generation to the next, and 4) a *forgetting* process, handling the rate of decay in retention of partisan loyalties subsequent to any suspension of democratic process eliminating the mass relevance of traditional parties. The most important elements are the learning and transmission processes. Consider some exemplary statements: At any one election, Converse and Pierce maintain, "We expect to find a rather clear positive correlation between age and the strength of party identification" (1986:96-97). Miller and Shanks specify the relationship between age and habituation: "[F]or most young adults (ages 26-29) there is much less malleability after the third election experience" (1996:130-31). In countries with established histories of democratic elections, age and electoral experience go together; where elections are new, age is not a surrogate for exposure to elections. Also, "[t]here is evidence of a kind of 'settling down' or habituation to a competitive party system, which occurs at a mass level as a secular trend over time" (Converse 1969:141). In this perspective, party identification is a persistent loyalty to a political party.

Applied to the British and German panel data, this theoretical orientation offers precise expectations with regard to the dynamics of partisanship:

- There will be rising aggregate levels of party identification and strength of attachment.
- These patterns will repeat themselves at the individual level.
- During the years of the panel surveys, the youngest cohort will become like their elders, displaying the same levels of partisan loyalty. Hence, young citizens will strengthen their partisan attachments more rapidly than older citizens will.
- Strong partisan loyalists will tend to retain their level of partisan attachment over time; few will be characterized by declining or changing levels of partisan strength.
- Because the approach expects so little change in partisanship over time, it does not specify whether movement to no party or to another party, and if so which one, is likely to characterize partisan change. Indeed, some imply that the stability of party identification is so high that it precludes systematic sources of change (see especially Shickler and Green 1997).

- Given the different histories of Britain and Germany, the aggregate level of party identification will be higher in the former. As the oldest age cohorts leave the sample, these differences will disappear.
- Given the particular history of Germany, the oldest Germans will not have the highest levels of stability and strength of partisan attachment.
- Because German Re-Unification is likely to provide a greater "exogenous shock" to Germans than the routine contests between Labour and the Conservatives affects Britons, partisanship in Germany will be more volatile (see Inglehart and Hochstein 1972 and Leithner 1997 for the general argument).

*Party identification as an optimizing (maximizing or minimizing) political choice*

Rational choice theory's conceptualization substitutes reasoned decisions for the emotional and affective elements included by the Michigan school. In this view, *partisan identification is a choice to prefer one party selected from a set of alternative political parties. The outcome derives from a running sum of the match between a citizen's preferences and the recent or expected behavior of the political parties.* Fiorina offers "a model of the individual voting decision that depends on the notion that citizens monitor party promises and past performances over time, and encapsulate their observations in a summary judgment termed 'party identification'" (1981:83). Achen (1992) modifies this claim. He accepts that citizens evaluate the past behavior of the parties. They do so, he maintains, as they evaluate prospective benefits to be obtained from the political parties. This approach to partisanship insists that citizens view the parties as viable alternatives.

Like members of the Michigan school, rational choice theorists expect relatively stable partisan attachments. Indeed, Fiorina cites approvingly Key's metaphor, "standing decision,"[14] an image that reflects persistent concerns and associated political judgments. Switching from party to party, however, is systematic and not uncommon. What accounts for changes in partisan preferences? When individuals alter their views of the benefits of the relationship between their policy preferences and the political parties, they change their partisan preferences (Fiorina 1984:410-11). Even as Achen maintains that the likelihood of new evaluations of the parties declines with age, he expects citizens to monitor the political parties. Bayesian updating allows them to make sure that they obtain the expected levels of personal

[14] This seems to be a misunderstanding. Key relates "standing decision" to a tendency for members of a community to support the same party over time. "In fact, there tends to be a standing decision by the community, although as a descriptive term 'decision' has connotations of deliberate choice that are apt to be misleading. The 'decision' may simply represent the balance between two opposing party groups each with striking powers of self-perpetuation. Their original formation may have in some instances represented a simple transplantation of partisan attachments (Key and Munger 1959:286)." In the posthumously published *The Responsible Electorate*, Key modifies this view. He relates switching voting to changing policy preferences, even as he maintains a view of party identification that carries a strong measure of "inertia" (1966:52, 150).

benefits (and see Gerber and Green, 1998, who analyze, modify, and expand this perspective) from the competing political parties.

Applied to BHPS and GSOEP, this theoretical orientation offers specific expectations with regard to the dynamics of partisanship:

- Party identification is more labile than the habitual behavior associated with the Michigan school's conceptualization.
- Among those who change partisanship, more will move to the other dominant party than to support no party.
- Increasing levels of political interest will be associated with greater levels of partisan instability.
- Persons who are concerned with economic circumstances –national and/or personal –are especially likely to change their party preference.
- The policy changes and tax rises associated with German Re-unification will generate changes in partisan preferences.

*Party Identification as a combination of habit and reason*

Although the behavioral and rational choice perspectives usually confront each other, a recent effort seeks to merge them. Marcus, Neumann, and Mackuen (2000) maintain that *partisan identification is a habit or a standing decision, which responds to economic worries*. This conceptualization accounts for the apparent persistence of partisan attachment without the theoretical baggage of identification or the frequent updating that characterizes rational choice approaches to the subject:

> We begin with a baseline model of an individual's "standing decision." We know that people develop a habitual response to politics that allows them to deal with elections without committing themselves to deep thought and consideration. Just as in ordinary life, standard routines must dominate because no one can, or need, think through every decision every day (Marcus, Nuemann, and Mackuen 2000: 108).

Most of the time, the authors maintain, individuals make unthinking political choices, relying on routine to decide party preferences. Absent a substantial reason to change, citizens report the same party preference again and again. What might induce this change? Moments of political anxiety linked to economic worries turn loyalists into interested followers of politics who assess the balance between issue concerns and the parties (2000: 97, 112). Combining worries and calculations, people move from party to party.

Here, our analysis examines several predictions:

- The dynamics of party identification display periods of strong stability punctuated with changes from one party to another.
- Partisanship moves in response to politicized worries about personal or general economic concerns.
- The greater the political interest and the greater the economic worries, the greater is the probability of moving from one party to another.

*Party identification is a stance towards the parties that derives from a decision heuristic*

We view party identification as the application of a general and simple heuristic: decide now by following the procedure used before. This decision rule produces four outcomes: a.) *never* select one or more of the parties; choose one of the parties b.) *always* or c.) *haphazardly*; d.) select each of the options *haphazardly*. "Never" and "always" imply the same result each time and, therefore, stability over time. Haphazard behavior indicates a variable outcome that traces a random process. Here, as in many of life's choices, people make decisions by persistently applying simple rules. Applying these rules fits the data obtained from BHPS and GSOEP much better than the hypotheses taken from the Michigan school and rational choice theory.

Recognizing the cognitive limitations of decision-making, the approach taps a powerful theoretical stream, which originates in Simon's (1957a, 1957b, 1957c) scholarship on bounded rationality. It drops the use of comprehensive decision rules, like the optimization of subjective utility, which may be applied to any and all circumstances. "Like comprehensive rationality, bounded rationality assumes that actors are goal-oriented, but bounded rationality takes into account the cognitive limitations of decision makers in attempting to achieve those goals" (Jones 1999:299). Consider as well Gigerenzer's and Selten's presentation: "Models of bounded rationality consist of simple step-by-step rules that function well under the constraints of limited search, knowledge, and time-whether or not an optimal procedure is available" (2000:8). In this view, people make decisions by applying heuristics to specific domains that are linked to more general building blocks. The rules are not "domain general as would be the case in subjective expected utility" (Gigerenzer 2001:38).[15] Bounded rationality points to simple heuristics that guide people's choices and behavior.

Note two additional benefits of this perspective: The heuristic offers an explanatory mechanism for Key's understanding of party identification as a standing decision characterized by inertia (see footnote

[15] Klein (1998, 2001) and the other essays collected in Gigerezer and Selten (2001) criticize those who rely only on the optimization of expected utility as the explanatory mechanism at the individual level. They argue on behalf of a set of alternatives, bounded rationality and the "adaptive toolbox." More, Klein (1998) provides evidence and analysis that denies Marcus, Neumann, and MacKuen's (2000) claim that crises engender rational calculations and

12) as well as the Columbia School's view of political preferences as "highly self-maintaining" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954:19).[16] The heuristic also allows for an explanatory mechanism that draws on cues obtained from social contexts to modify or reinforce political choices, raising or lowering the frequency of selecting a party at one point in time and, therefore, over time.

In addition, our perspective avoids some of the problems that adhere to each of the theoretical alternatives as well as the effort to meld them. It does not include by definition the emotional commitment[17] of the Michigan school's conceptualization or the demanding assumptions of rational choice's optimization of expected utility. It avoids as well the theoretical flaws in the traditional conceptualization of party identification. The decision to link the concept to reference group theory runs counter to Merton's (1957:237-386) presentation of the underlying theoretical source. Merton distinguishes among "groups," which require the social interaction of members; "collectivities," which entail a sense of solidarity, shared values, and an "attendant sense of moral obligations to fulfill role expectations," and "social categories," which he defines as "aggregates of social statuses, the occupants of which are not in social interaction" (1957:299).[18] Most party identifiers belong to a social category, not a reference group. This location does not entail a psychological commitment to the referent, as the Michigan school maintains. In addition, partisan choice does not display the characteristics for which the principles of rational choice theory apply: clear goals of obvious impact on people's lives and a clear choice about the effectiveness of various means to reach those ends. "When are people more likely to make the rational choice? People are more likely to act instrumentally when the incentives are apparent, there are large consequences to their decisions, and there is a clear relationship between means and ends" (Chong 2000:62-3). These are all absent when people make decisions about partisan support, and our conceptualization avoids these theoretical pitfalls.

Our theoretical perspective implies a set of expectations about the dynamics of partisanship:

- The dynamics of party identification will not display the characteristics that are associated with social identifications or efforts to optimize maximum utility, or a combination of habit and calculation.

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action. Instead in those circumstances, Klein argues, individuals usually narrow the set of choices and follow established procedures.

[16] With regard to electoral choice, they write, "For many people, votes are not perceived as decisions to be made in each specific election. For them, voting traditions are not much changed much more often than careers are chosen, religions drifted into or away from, or tastes revised" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954:17).

[17] For a view of identification that is "not a fixed property of an individual but a temporal accomplishment," see Oyserman and Packer (1996: 200 and the sources cited there). This conceptualization takes the concept away from the language of psychological commitments.

[18] Merton (1957: 284) notes that Norman Kaplan's unpublished dissertation, the cited source for Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes's use of reference group theory (1960:162), carefully distinguishes among these concepts.

- Preference for a party is persistent or haphazard.
- At any point in time, decisions about whether to support a political party are conditioned by past choices.
- Very few people cross the lines of the major parties.
- The movement among the political choices of those who change displays no clear patterns.
- The levels of stability of support for the preferred party reflect social contexts: the more that members of people's social networks support a particular party, the more frequently do they select that party over time.

## The Dynamics of Party Identification

*The aggregate distribution of party identification over time*

The evidence taken from the BHPS and GSOEP panel surveys shows remarkable similarities even as it details the differences between the two countries. Figure 1 aggregates the responses of persons who were in all waves of the panels in each country, for Britain during the years 1991-99, and for Germany, 1985-1998.[19] Panel A echoes numerous surveys and the results of the two General Elections in Britain. The graph shows citizens moving away from the Conservative Party towards Labour. Note two primary points of transition, just after the election of 1992 and during the years before the balloting of 1997. There seems to be no systematic variation with regard to the selection, "no party preference." As do cross-sectional surveys in Germany, Panel B shows a break-point in 1990, the year of Re-Unification. For the first six years, the panel members display relatively stable proportions of preference for the Christian Democrats/Socials, the Social Democrats, and no preference. After Re-Unification, the percentage preferring no party rises and stays relatively high. The transformation of the German State seems not to influence the relative perceptions of the parties. The aggregated panel data suggest that few people reward Kohl's party for ending the Communist regime in East Germany and for drawing together the two German states. Similarly, it seems that few people punish the CDU/CSU for increasing taxes that were levied to pay for the transformation. This crisis seems to have little effect on the distribution of partisanship in Germany. Note too that in the election years, 1987, 1990, 1994, and 1998, there are slight increases in the percentage who support one of the parties (and see Zelle, 1998). In addition, no marked differences in levels of aggregate partisanship appear, no matter the differences in the political histories of these countries.

[19] Note that our analysis focuses on three choices in each country: the two largest parties and no preference. We have excluded the other parties because relatively few respondents choose them in any given year and in order to simplify an already complex comparative analysis.

*Place Figure 1 Here*

These aggregate level figures begin to depict the flow of party identification in the two countries over time. They do not display growing levels of partisanship among those in the panel, an expectation of the Michigan school. Similarly, they do not display a strong reaction to German Re-Unification. There was no large-scale movement to Kohl and the Christian Democrats, the party responsible for the political transformation. Note as well that they do not display the recurrent patterns that would follow if the dynamics of partisanship were to follow a simple Markov process.[20] In order to explore more fully the dynamics of party identification in both countries, we will display results at the individual level of analysis.

*Persistence and Change in Party Identification*

What patterns of partisan choice apply over time at the individual level? A summary of our analysis detailed below uncovers four types of responses in both countries. The largest set includes those who never select one the major parties and sometimes or always choose its rival. Next in size are those who never prefer either of the two largest parties. Smallest are those who move among the choices, sometimes picking one of the parties, sometimes its rival, and sometimes claiming no party preference. In Britain, 6 percent never pick either of the dominant parties and 77 percent select one of them at least once but never the other, and 12 percent select Labour, the Tories, and no party preference at least once. These combine to 95 percent of the sample. In Germany, 12 percent of the respondents never pick either of the dominant political parties and 76 percent select one at least once but never the other, while 8 percent move among these choices (totaling 96 percent of the population). Before we detail these clusters, we will provide a broad overview of persistence and change in party identification at the individual level.

*1. There is short-term movement in partisan preference.* Consider first the relatively simple question of the stability of partisanship across three adjacent years. In Britain, 65 percent selected the same choice in 1991-93; 69 percent in 1994-96, and 67 percent in the final three years 1997-99. In Germany, 57 percent prefer the same party or no party in 1985-87, 61 percent in 1988-90, 62 percent in 1991-93,

[20] Leithner (1997) explores the extent to which the dynamics of partisanship in Australia and New Zealand resemble a Markov process. This process applies a consistent local rule to account for aggregate patterns. "In general, a Markov chain, or process, is a sequence of … observations such that the transition probability matrix from one state to the next is constant. A Markov process has no memory" (Barnett, Ziegler, and Byleen 2000:466). If a fixed transition rule applies and "if some power of P has only positive entries," (Barnett, Ziegler, and Byleen 2000:478) as is the case here, the process will reach a stationary point. The instability evident in Figure 1 indicates that the results do not display a stationary point, and are not characterized, therefore, by a Markov chain. We will return to this theme below.

and 62 percent in 1994-96. From this it would seem that party identification is a relatively stable, but not unchanging political phenomenon.

*2. Many people offer the same response most of the time.* Table 1 presents the percentages of people in each country who never select one of the major parties; who always choose the same one, and who prefer one of the parties most of the time.

- Approximately one-third of the British electorate and one-fourth of the Germans always give the same response, selecting the same party or claiming no preference again and again.
- Nearly eighty percent offer the same answer most of the time (six of nine times in Britain and nine of 14 times in Germany).
- A little less than half never select one of the major parties.

The two countries display very similar results. The differences reflect the higher proportion of Britons who consistently pick a party and the relative strength of Labour during the decade under analysis. These results closely resemble those found by Shickler and Green (1997), who examined British and German panel evidence from earlier and shorter periods of times. Both electorates are composed of many people who offer the same party preferences during most of the waves of the surveys.

*Place Table 1 Here*

*3. Partisanship displays a recurrent tilt.* Additional details depict most people as persistently leaning towards one of the parties and hardly ever selecting its major rival. Consider the effects of choosing one of the parties at least once:

- On average, those who pick Labour (n=2902) select that party 5.84 times (65 percent); they pick the Tories .53 times (6 percent); other parties .62 times (8 percent), and no party twice (22 percent) during the nine years.
- On average, those who choose the Conservatives (n=2290) do so 5.68 times (63 percent); they select Labour, .62 (7 percent), other parties, .44 (5 percent), and no party 2.26 (25 percent) times.
- On average, those who pick the SPD (n=1525) choose that party 6.81 times (56 percent); pick the CDU/CSU .89 times (6 percent); other parties .75 (5 percent), and no party 4.57 (34 percent) out of the fourteen years.
- Similarly on average, those who opt for the CDU/CSU (n=1397) do so 6.74 times (55 percent); choose the SPD 1.02 times (7 percent), other parties .53 times (3 percent) and no party 4.71 (35 percent) times during the years of the panel.

In sum, having picked a party once, most people do not select the other major party. Rather, they tend to return to their party, varying that with opting for no party identification.

*4. Crossing party lines is infrequent and not systematic.* In order to explore the movement among the choices in greater depth, we arranged the responses into a Columnar Report.[21] Again, we find that relatively few people ever choose both of the dominant parties. This analysis further shows that hardly any move directly from one to the other, and even fewer change from one party to become a consistent supporter of the other dominant party.

- In Britain, 440 persons (8.4 percent) select both of the major parties, during the years of the survey. 204 persons (3.9 percent of the total) move directly from the Tories (i.e., without first stopping at no party preference or another party) to Labour or from Labour to the Conservatives. Furthermore, twenty-three persons (.43 percent) switch, in the sense of moving from supporting one party directly to the other and persistently supporting the new choice.
- In Germany, 358 persons (12.4 percent) opt both for the SPD and the CDU/CSU at least once during the fourteen years of the panel; 189 (6.5 percent) move directly from one dominant party to the other; 131 (4.5 percent) select each of the two parties at least twice, and eight persons (0.3 percent) persistently support one of the two political organizations at the end of the panel, after having preferred the other party at an earlier point in time.

*5. Partisanship over time is both simple and complex.* People who pick a party divide into two sets: persistent supporters and haphazard supporters. Those who are persistent display the same pattern over time; those who are haphazard display multiple and diverse patterns.

- As we know from Table 1 in Britain, 16.1 percent always prefer Labour, displaying the following pattern: LLLLLLLLL, 12.8 percent always choose the Conservatives (CCCCCCCCC), and 6 percent persistently claim no party allegiance (NNNNNNNNN). These total 1869 people.
- The other 2519 persons in the panel survey display remarkably diverse preferences over time. There were 1603 other distributions, on average 1.6 persons per pattern. Of these, only one (NLLLLLLLL) accounts for as much as one percent of the responses (1.5 percent). Consider now the case of persons who mimic the aggregate trend: CCCLLLLLL. How many are there with the precise pattern? Four persons, 0.08 percent of the sample! Aggregate trends are the result of individual decisions, but hardly anyone behaves like the national results.
- For Germany, Table 1B indicates that 25.4 percent always choose one of the two parties or indicate no party preference.

[21] This technique displays the responses for each year as a column in a table that includes all years. We labeled the parties as follows: in Britain, L=Labour, C=Conservatives; in Germany, S=Social Democrats, C=Christian Democrats/Socials; in both O=Other, and N=None). For a full treatment of the analysis of count data, see Winkelmann 2000.

- The remaining 2163 persons are even more diverse than the British respondents, displaying 1649 patterns, 1.3 patterns per person. Of these the next most frequent pattern (NSSSSSSSSSSSS, once none and the remainder Social Democrat) describes twenty-two persons (.65 percent). No one offered responses that follow the aggregate trend of the two parties (the pattern SSCSSSSSSSCSS). Here too individual choices do not mirror national results.

Consider now the patterns among those who only choose one of the parties.

- In Britain, 38 percent choose their party every time and another 13-14 percent pick their party eight of nine times. Of those who do not always choose their party, the mean rate of selection is four in eight years, indicating a pattern close that resembles a coin toss between "yes" and "no" for each year. Figure 2A details the frequency of choice for each party.
- In Germany, 25 percent select their party every time and another 10 percent do so all but one time in the fourteen years. Among those who do not always choose their party, the mean rate of selection is slightly more than seven out of fourteen years, again a results that appears to be a coin toss each year. Figure 2B details the pattern, showing the distinction between those who always support a party and the larger grouping, whose members distribute themselves equally among all the possible responses.
- Note that the differences between Britain and Germany appear to derive from the greater number of years in GSOEP and, therefore, the increased opportunity to stray. When we analyze only the first nine years of the panel, 45 percent supported their party all or all but one time.

*Place Figure 2 Here*

- We also explored the selections of persons who choose each of the two dominant parties at least once during the panel years. In both countries, these persons (approximately ten percent of the population) pick haphazardly among the choices. The means for these British citizens are Labour, three times; Conservatives three, and no party, three of nine times. In Germany, the responses are very similar: they pick the SPD four times, the Christian Democrats/Socials four times, another party once, and no party six times.[22]

*6. The Dynamics of Partisanship do not follow the rules of a Markov Process.*

Our analysis depicts the strong effects of partisanship at one point at other points in time. Having chosen a party once, most people come to back to select that party again and again, but not always. How regular are these decisions? Is there evidence that they follow the logic of a Markov Chain? We have already noted that the aggregate results displayed in Figure 2 do not conform to the stationary patterns that would accompany a process described by a Markov Chain (see p. 13 and footnote 20). There is

[22] Kohler (2001) finds results very similar to those that we report in an analysis that looks at the Greens and the Free Democrats as well as the SPD and CDU/CSU and no party.

additional evidence to indicate that these regularities do not conform precisely to the characteristics of a Markov process:

- At any one point in time, partisan choice responds to the number of times that the party was chosen in the past, but the relationship is not a simple direct line and it also varies according by political party.
- In addition, partisan choice responds to more than the immediate preceding selection. The results indicate the extent to which support for a political party at a particular point in time depends on choosing that party two, four, six, or eight years before. They show very strong, but not consistent effects in both countries.[23]

A single logic that is applied uniformly across a population does not account for the flow of partisanship.

*7. Party identification is more labile than religious identification.*

Recall that the Michigan conceptualization of party identification draws explicit parallels with religious loyalties. Evidence taken from BHPS and GSOEP details differences between these phenomena:

- In Britain during the 1990s, religious attachment is more stable than Tory identification and more labile than Labour identification. BHPS taps religious loyalties twice, in 1991 and 1997. Between these two years, 85 percent of the Catholics retains the same identification, as did 78 percent of the Anglicans, 75 percent of the Church of Scotland, and 70 percent of the Methodists. Compare this to the rates of stability for party identification: 60 percent of the Tories, 90 percent of Labour supporters, and 51 percent of the Liberal Democrats. Consider too that 75 percent of those with no religion in 1991 have none in 1997, whereas 49 percent of those who claim no party identification in 1991 offer the same response in 1997. On a related point, less than one percent converted from one religion to another during this period.
- In Germany, religious identification is always more persistent than party attachments. 85 percent of the Catholics in 1990 remain so in 1998, as do 82 percent of the Protestants. At the same time, 68 percent of those who prefer the SPD in 1990 do so again in 1998, as do 67 percent of the Christian Democrats/Socials. Note that 73 percent of those with no religion in 1990 continue to have none seven years later and 72 percent continued to have no party identification between the two points in time. Finally, no more than two percent of Catholics or Protestants converted to the other religion during these years.

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[23] For reasons of space, we have not included the tables in this paper. These results as well as the other analyses noted below and not included here may be obtained from the authors.

- Differences in the structural bases of religious and party attachments help to account for these patterns. Numerous occasions and sources, the most obvious of which are attendance at church services and the social and psychological reinforcements that follow from these meetings, solidify religious attachments. Consider that Catholics in Germany, who never attend church during 1993-1997, 64 percent remain Catholics and among Protestants who never attend church 61 percent retain the same religious identification. In both cases, well over 90 percent of regular churchgoers do not change their religions. Currently, none of the political parties which stand at the heart of our study offer powerful organizational, ideological, and friendship sources for partisan stability. Furthermore, British political events in the preceding decade had reduced Labour to its hard-core and bloated the size of Conservative supporters helping to account for the subsequent differences in partisan stability. There is little reason to conceptualize party identification as a psychological attachment to a social object, and so, there is strong reason to attempt to account for the stability of this political decision.

Our analysis supports several generalizations about the flow of partisan identification over time. Most citizens –well over 80 percent in each country –never support one or more of the dominant parties. Most –about 75 percent –reject one and support the other major party. Of these, about half always support the same party and about half sometimes choose it and sometimes do not. Note that this indicates that no more than 35-40 percent display recurrent loyalties to a political party, the kind of attachments assumed by the Michigan school's conceptualization. About ten percent move haphazardly across the multiple choices over time. As a result, about half of the people apply a decision rule that resembles a coin-toss, moving them far from rational choice theory's optimizing calculations and the Michigan schools' loyalties. Citizens offer a set of four alternative responses to questions about their party preferences. They relate to the parties by applying a decision rule that draws on time, "always, sometimes, or never" supporting or rejecting the political parties.

So far our analysis has been descriptive, exploring one measure at a time and drawing theoretical implications from many of these measures. In the next section, we provide a multivariate test of the competing hypotheses. These results also do no support the interpretation of partisanship as the result of Bayesian updating of political preferences tied to economic interests and political interest. The analysis also demonstrates that partisan preference is not a simple loyalty, immune to sources of change. Rather, party identification responds in systematic ways to variables that describe people's social contexts.

**What Raises and Lowers the Rate of Partisan Stability:**
**a multivariate test of the Michigan school and rational choice?**

Because of the stickiness of partisanship over time, our analysis examines the *rate of stability*, the frequency by which people choose a party, not the question of cross-party switching. Thus, the effects of various predictor variables on the dynamics of partisanship appear, *after* controls for the selection of that party during the years of the panel surveys.[24] Put differently, we use the retention of party identification as a base-line, as we seek to explain what moves people above or below that marker. Note as well that we do not directly address the origins of support for a particular party in this analysis.

We pursue our goal by using OLS regression to examine the explanatory impact of different factors on the stability of partisan preference. The analysis seeks to explain the number of times a person supports one or the other major political party over the years of the panel, controlling for the concept's stickiness. The models address the conceptualization drawn from the Michigan school by examining the effects of different age cohorts. This approach also expects none of the other variables to display much explanatory power. Measures of economic concerns and political interest tap the implications of rational choice theory as well as Marcus and his colleagues' effort to join the two different perspectives. If Bayesian updating occurs, political interest and economic concerns linked to politics will stand as consistent predictors of partisan instability. Variables that describe religious and social class contexts and marital status explore our expectation that the stability of partisan preference reflects social context.

Consider the results of Table 2A, which explores the predictors of how frequently people support Labour and the Conservatives (and see the Appendix for a discussion of the relevant measures).

- Differences of age cohort accord with the Michigan School's expectations with regard to the Tories, but not Labour.
- Against the expectations of those who emphasize the importance of economic factors, these variables do not display a consistent influence on the frequency of support for either party.
- Against the predictions that high levels of political interest are associated with moving from one party to the other, the data show a strong positive association between this variable and the stability of partisanship.
- Social context affects the dynamics of partisanship. This applies to membership in trade unions, which raises support for Labour over time and lowers preference for the Tories. Because each of the two dominant parties has a different association with the religious traditions of Britain, the frequency of church attendance, in and of itself, does not influence the rate of support for the two parties. In

order to explore further this theme, we constructed two additional variables by interacting the categories of religious identification and the frequency of church attendance. Here, we found strong associations between regular attendance among Catholics and persistent support for Labour and the parallel pattern among Anglicans and support for the Conservatives (see also Kotler-Berkowitz 2001). Similarly, the more frequently people choose a middle class identity, the higher is the rate that they prefer the Conservatives and the lower the rate of their support for Labour. These results match the well-established understanding that the choice of party reflects the social circumstances of citizens, linking working class and Catholic identity and trade union membership with Labour and attachments to the middle class and the Church of England to the Conservatives.

*Place Table 2A Here*

Consider now some of the results that may be obtained from Table 2B (and see the Appendix for a discussion of the relevant measures):

- Differences of age cohort display weak effects, offering limited support for the Michigan school's expectations.
- Here too, high levels of political interest are associated with partisan stability, not partisan change, a finding not in keeping with the hypothesis that political interest underpins the relationship between economic perceptions and political choice.
- Again, economic concerns have different effects on partisan stability. Worries over job security raise the level of SPD stability and have no impact on support for the CDU/CSU. Concerns over the economy writ large have the opposite effect on stability for each party, lending persistent support for the governing party, not its Social Democratic opponent. Here, the assessment of the relationship between party and the economy does not appear to be tied to particular ups and downs. Rather, all voters appear to perceive the CDU/CSU as better able to manage the general economy.
- Social context matters in important ways: Persistent union membership is strongly associated with persistent support for the SPD and opposition to the CDU/CSU. Catholics are especially likely to display ongoing support for the CDU/CSU, and the frequency of church attendance sharply distinguishes the persistence of support for each of the parties. Furthermore, the more that people remain married over the years of the survey, the higher is their rate of support for each party. The level of local political participation affects the rate of support for the SPD but not the Christian Democrats. Note, however, that the indirect measures of social context, occupation and education,

[24] Another strategy would be to constrain the sample to persons who have ever chosen a party and then to examine the effects of the predictor variables on the frequency of that choice. When we apply this approach, we find results very much like the results presented here.

have hardly any impact on partisan stability. Here as in Britain, trade unions and church attendance are associated with the preference for particular parties, the SPD and the CDU/CSU respectively.

*Place Table 2B Here*

We also completed a complementary analysis, in which party identification in the first year served as the control variable and the number of times a party is selected in the subsequent years was the dependent variable. In both countries, most of the results strongly resemble those displayed in Tables 2A and 2B. There are, however, important exceptions. In Britain, the effects of age differences, being married, and working at a routine clerical job on support for the Conservative party declines. In Germany with regard to the SPD, the age differences disappear, and being a Roman Catholic now affects stability, whereas concerns about job security no longer matter. For the CDU/CSU, only the difference between the oldest and youngest cohort retains its impact on stability with regard to the age cohorts and being married no longer adds to the persistence of partisanship. These new equations cast doubt on the relationship between age cohort and partisan stability, a key element of the Michigan model, while also weakening the link between job fears and support for the SPD.

The regression analyses also begin to address the effort to explain both the initial decision to support a party as well as the subsequent choices. The results provide preliminary support for Simon's expectation (1957a: 94-6) that external factors, such as social context, account for the initial decision, while internal matters, such as decision heuristics, are especially important in accounting for the rate of persistence of the choice. Our analysis meshes with a long line of studies of party identification, which find the origins of party preferences in social class and religious contexts.

Finally, we return to the question of movement across the major parties. We use a logistic regression to explore the predictors of the probability of preferring both of the parties at least once during the panel. Because very few people fit into this category (see above p. 12), the analysis is only suggestive. In Britain, only trade union membership is positively associated with this outcome; none of the other variables shows any predictive power. In Germany, only political interest helps to predict movement across the parties. The relationship, however, is the *opposite* of what follows from rational choice theory. It is difficult to maintain that moving from party to party reflects Bayesian updating, when the multiple selection of both parties over time is not positively associated with paying attention to politics and when it has no relationship with concerns about the economy or job security. Here too, the analysis denies the expectations of rational choice theory.

## The Dynamics of Partisan Strength

The BHPS and GSOEP panel data give us the opportunity to examine the dynamics of the strength of partisan attachment, a central component of the Michigan model. Again, the results do not support this theoretical orientation.

*1. The aggregate level of partisan strength does not grow with increasing exposure to elections or age.*

In neither country does the intensity of partisan preference increase over time. The two panels in Figure 3 display the trend lines, according to three age cohorts, and by implication for the sample means as well. There is no evidence of an aggregate cumulative effect, showing increasing strength over time. Exposure to elections does not raise the intensity of partisan preference. These results do not derive from increasing numbers of persons who claim no party preferences. A separate analysis shows that even among those who retain attachments to the parties, the intensity of support declines. This pattern is abetted but not accounted for by those who give up their partisan loyalties. In both, the aggregate strength of party attachment increases in election years, and in each the rise is always slight. Note as well: in Germany declines in partisan intensity follow Re-Unification, and so do declines in the percentage of Germans who prefer one of the political parties. Contrary to the expectations of the Michigan school, aggregate levels of partisan strength do not increase with increased exposure to elections.

*Place Figure 3 Here*

A more detailed look shows that the strength of partisan attachment does not increase over time. We gathered the scores into two blocks of time, one measuring the first three (Britain) or four (Germany) waves and another the final three (Britain) or four (Germany) waves. In each case, we subtracted the last set from the first set, so as to see whether partisan strength increases over time. In Britain and Germany, there are declines in partisan strength. In the former the mean score declines .21 and in the latter the mean drops by .93. As we observe the same people over time, we watch their strength of partisan attachment decline.

Consider now the relationship between partisan strength and age cohorts even more closely. The British and German respondents enter the surveys with different political histories. In 1991 forty-five year old Britons, for example, had experienced the opportunity to vote in six elections (February and October 1970, as well as 1974, 1979, 1983, and 1987). Germans who began the GSOEP survey at that age lived through four elections (1972, 1976, 1980, and 1983). Furthermore, differences associated with Germany's Nazi era and Britain's persistent democracy magnify these distinctions among the oldest cohorts. After all, Germans, who were sixty-five at the start of the survey were born in 1920, were raised

during the Nazi years, and came to maturity during the war. We have reason, therefore, to expect these differences to appear as the data displays levels of partisan strength according to the age cohorts.

True to these multiple expectations, the different age cohorts do not begin with the same levels of partisan intensity. Figure 3 shows these patterns for each country. As the Michigan school hypothesizes, in both countries, the lowest levels appear among the youngest cohort. Both surveys also display evidence of initial jumps by this group towards the levels of support displayed by older voters. Note, however, that the trend lines do not converge. Rather, they resemble parallel tracks. There is, therefore, no evidence that experiencing elections raises partisan strength. In addition, there is no support for the claim that young voters come to share the same levels of partisan attachment as their elders.

The data also help us to distinguish between the two countries. In Britain's established democracy, the oldest cohort starts and remains at the highest levels of partisan strength; these people are followed by the middle and then the youngest sets. In Germany, the oldest group, persons born before 1935, consistently and persistently displays lower levels of intensity than the middle cohort does. They have not developed the same commitment to the parties as those who came of political age during the post-war democracy.

*2. Young people do not display more rapid increases in partisan strength than older people* do. This too contradicts the Michigan school's expectations. We explore the relationship among time, age cohort, and changes in partisan strength in an OLS regression equation. Here, the difference between the two blocs of time is the dependent variable. In both Britain and Germany, the youngest set of citizens does not display the greatest increase in partisan strength. To the contrary, the oldest set, persons 51 years of age or older in the first year of the survey, consistently display the strongest growth in partisan strength.

- In Britain, the regression coefficients between age category and the measure of difference in partisan strength, in which the variable categorizing persons aged 16-30 is suppressed, is as follows: Age 31-50: 0.05 and Age 51+: 0.24*.[25]
- In Germany, the relationship among these variables: Age 31-50: 0.15 and Age 51+: 0.65**.

During the nine years of the British panel and the fifteen years of the German survey, the youngest set of citizens does not strengthen their partisan identification more rapidly than do older citizens. Rather, the older the voter is, the more that party identification strengthens over time.

*3. The level of partisan strength varies over time.* Persons who claim a very strong partisan attachment in any particular year are not especially likely to maintain that intensity in other years.

[25] The control variables and statistical notations in each equation are the same ones used in Tables 2A and 2B. As we argue, there is reason to provide separate regression equations, which include a control for whether or not the respondent ever supported one of the major parties. Applied to the measure of difference in partisan strength, the results show no substantive changes.

- In Britain, 30 percent of those who ever report being a very strong partisan select no party at least once during the nine years. Similarly, less than one percent of the sample always claim a strong attachment to a party, and 3.1 percent report that they are strong partisans six or more times.
- In Germany, 70 percent of those who ever report being a very strong partisan prefer no party at least once during the fourteen years. Similarly, less than one percent of the sample always claim a strong attachment to a party, and 12.8 percent claim to be very strong partisans nine or more times.

Variations in the intensity of party identification indicate that it does not behave like a habit derived from a social identification.

**Reconceptualizing Party Identification: Theoretical Implications and Conclusions**

Our analysis presents party identification as a stance or an orientation to the major political parties. To the question, "Do you support a political party?" most people offer one of four simple answers:

1. No, which is unequivocal, meaning never any the political parties.
2. Yes, which is unequivocal, meaning never Party A and always Party B.
3. Yes, which is both unequivocal and equivocal, meaning never Party A and as likely as not Party B.
4. An equivocal yes and no, meaning sometimes each of these choices as well as no party preference.

As a result, party orientation is a cluster of concepts. The Michigan conceptualization of party identification is one. Party negativity defined as maintaining a persistent opposition to all the parties is another. These join party indifference, whose conceptual definition is moving haphazardly among the available choices. Our research also notes a fourth concept, indifferent support, which characterizes people who haphazardly prefer one of the parties and never support its rival. Each type or set of answers applies a simple heuristic to the decision about party preference, repeat the last choice or flip a coin. Here, as in many of life's decisions, people choose by applying simple rules.

We suggest that the decision heuristic accounts for the dynamic patterns observed in the BHPS and GSOEP panel data. As a result, it should replace the Michigan's school effort to explain individual decisions by assimilating them to the language of psychological attachment and relying on reference group theory. The traditional approach unnecessarily introduces the principle that individuals develop emotional loyalties to relatively distant political objects. Our results indicate that some people do that, but most do not. It should also replace the optimizing language applied by rational choice theory to decisions about political parties. There is no evidence in these surveys that any more than a handful of people relate to the parties as equally viable political options, as meaningful alternatives. Similarly, the

data do not bear out the theory's expectations about the relationship among economic concerns, political interest, and partisan stability and change. There is little evidence in our data that people in established democracies update their preferences in response to an understanding of the immediate conditions of their lives and their evaluations of the political parties. Party identification is neither a loyalty nor a strategic choice.

Why do people apply a decision heuristic? There are good general reasons to do so. First, it derives from what they usually do. "Always, "never," and "haphazardly" characterize all kinds of decisions. Political selections like other choices in life apply the logic of bounded rationality. Simple rules of various kinds prevail. In addition, using a heuristic provides an especially handy rule of thumb to apply to a sphere of life that is relatively distant from their concerns and yet entails actual decisions, like elections. In established democracies, politics is not sufficiently relevant to their lives for people to develop emotional attachments or to do the calculations that engender Bayesian updating.

The GSOEP provides several points of evidence that detail how far politics is from people's lives. The BHPS helps us to address the issue of political interest.

- *Politics is perceived as relatively unimportant.* In 1992, 1994, and 1995, GSOEP asks people to rank the importance of a series of items in their lives, providing a scale, where 1=unimportant; 2= not very important; 3=important, and 4=very important. The mean score for all the items over the three years is 3.04. Political activity is the least important. In descending order, they are: family (3.7), happy marriage or partnership (3.6), dwelling (3.44), environment (3.38), children (3.26), income (3.33), leisure (3.12), being there for others (3.10), work (3.00), being able to buy things (2.95), circle of friends (2.91), owning a home (2.76), being fulfilled (2.70), success at one's job (2.67), religion (2.52), travel (2.45), political activity (1.98). By a considerable distance, political activity is the least important item.
- *The level of interest in politics is consistently low.* BHPS asks the respondents about their interest in politics in the first six waves and GSOEP probes this issue in all but the first wave. In both cases, the responses vary on a scale where 1=none; 2=weak; 3=strong, and 4=very strong. In Britain, the aggregate results do not much vary, ranging between 2.4 and 2.5, with the highest score in the year of the 1992 General Election. In Germany, the responses vary between 2.3 and 2.5; however, the peak occurring in 1991 is a spike associated with German Re-unification.
- *Relatively few take part in local political activities.* At eight opportunities, GSOEP asks people about their level of participation in local politics, a relatively easy mode of political activity. With

one exception, about ninety percent reply that they do not take part at all; the exception again is 1991, when twenty percent claim to participate at least sometimes in local politics.[26]

In a sphere of activity relatively distant from people's lives, persistently applying a simple heuristic makes perfect sense.

Unlike other political attitudes, partisanship is not ambivalent.[27] Most everyone places at least one of the parties out of bounds. The structure of electoral politics –the competing political parties, the forced choice at elections –insists that people choose among the political parties, and so they do. Similarly, a well-established literature associates the social contexts of class and religion with party preference. Our analysis shows that social interactions dampen or accelerate the rate of stability and change in partisan loyalty. People who encounter others who share their partisan preferences have higher rates of persistence; those who interact with people with other views have higher rates of defection. Furthermore, Kohler (2001) reports that those few people whose changes in occupation imply new social class contexts eventually change their partisan preferences. As people apply this simple heuristic to their views of the parties, partisanship becomes a "standing decision," with a probabilistic and social component.

Consider some implications for the conceptualization and measurement of party identification. At a single point in time, the claim to support a political party conflates those who are party loyalists (always or almost always choose the party and never the other), haphazard supporters (sometimes pick the party but never the other) and those with haphazard preferences (any of the alternatives). In the cross-section, the concept's denotation applies to people with very different orientations to the political parties. As a result, it is not surprising that numerous studies of party identification in the European democracies have been confused by finding that people change their party identification and vote preference in tandem (see for example Crewe 1976 and Converse and Pierce 1986, Shively 1977, and Zuckerman 1989). Haphazard supporters and people who move more or less randomly among the people selections will have no problem altering their announced partisan preference when they cast a ballot for a new political choice.

The analysis applies to Britain and Germany, no matter their different political histories. The results for the countries are not identical. As expected, the oldest cohort of Germans has a lower rate of party support than the middle category. More Germans consistently support no party than do people in Britain. Still, the same classifications of party orientations apply, the clusters account for about the same

[26] Similarly low levels of interest in politics and political activity appear in many other studies, see for example Parry, Moyser, and Day (1992): 44, Kaase (1989) van Deth (1989), and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995): 70.

proportion, and social context has similar effects on the stability of party preferences in both countries. The differences between the two countries suggest as well that the clusters of party orientations will apply to other established democracies. The more that electoral contests revolve around political parties, the more likely is it that citizens will cluster into the four types of orientations that we have found here. The decision heuristic combines with the political structures to influence the types of orientations to the political parties. It follows from this that the more that electoral competition revolves around contests between and among individual candidates, the more likely is party support to display the ambivalence characteristic of other political attitudes. In these circumstances, political choices made over time will increasingly look as if they are the results of haphazard choices.

Note the implications for electoral strategists, those who organize the party's campaigns. As a contest begins, less than half the electorate is closed to each of the parties (roughly half of the 75 percent who never support one of the parties and always or sometimes support the other). Another ten percent never claim a party allegiance and are almost certain not to vote. Each party can draw on a hard-core of loyalists that does not exceed twenty percent of the electorate. As a result, the electoral task seeks to draw the vote of haphazard supporters and the others with haphazard preferences. The inherent diversity of opinions within these two categories magnifies the problem and ensures that electoral outcomes will be affected by particular and unique events of the moment at least as much as the strategies of campaigner organizers and party officials.

Party identification is a stance that people take towards the political parties. They apply a consistent rule, persistently returning to the same preference year after year or behaving haphazardly, moving with no clear pattern among the choices. Most take a definitively negative stance towards one of the parties and a positive stance towards the other major party. Of these, about half display behavior that reflects a psychological commitment and about half are as likely as not to pick that party when asked. For most people, party identification is neither a loyalty nor a calculated choice, but a way to situate oneself in relation to the relatively distant objects of politics.

[27] On the view of political attitudes as variable, probabilistic, and ambivalent, see Alvarez and Franklin 1994; Alvarez, Brehm, and Wilson 2001; Kinder 1983; Hill and Kriesi 2001; Stimson 1995, Zaller 1992 and Zaller and Feldman 1992.

| *Table 1A*<br>**Stability of Party Identification in Britain among those in all nine waves** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **never** | **always** | **6 or more times (.67 of the total opportunities)** |
| **Labour** | .460 | .168 | .313 |
| **Conservative** | .574 | .126 | .240 |
| **Other parties** | .949 | .003 | .010 |
| **None** | .388 | .059 | .191 |
| **Total (excluding other parties)** | | .353 | .749 |
| **N=5377** | | | |

| *Table 1B*<br>**Stability of Party Identification in Germany among those in all fourteen waves** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **never** | **always** | **9 or more times (.63 of the total opportunities)** |
| **Social Democrats** | .474 | .094 | .252 |
| **Christian Democrats/Socials** | .440 | .091 | .231 |
| **Other parties** | .779 | .010 | .031 |
| **None** | .189 | .069 | .316 |
| **Total (excluding other parties)** | | .254 | .799 |
| **N=2897** | | | |

**Table 2A**
**The Persistence of Party Support in Britain**
**N=5300**

| **Predictor Variables** | **Frequency of Conservative Support** | | **Frequency of Labour Support** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **B** | **Beta** | **B** | **Beta** |
| **Gender** (female) | -.08 | -.01 | -.00 | -.00 |
| **Age Cohort** (youngest suppressed) | | | | |
| 31-50, | .29*** | .04 | -.03 | -.00 |
| 51 and older | .55*** | .07 | .17 | .02 |
| Region (south suppressed) | .04 | .00 | .34*** | .05 |
| **Religion** (no religion suppressed) | | | | |
| Church of England | .31*** | .04 | -.09 | -.01 |
| Roman Catholic | -.07 | -.01 | .21* | .02 |
| Other Protestant | .01 | .00 | -.09 | -.01 |
| Other Religions | -.10 | -.00 | -.09 | -.00 |
| **Attends "church" at least monthly** | .07 | .01 | -.04 | -.00 |
| **Occupation** (not in work suppressed) | | | | |
| Goldthorpe service class | -.15 | -.02 | -.16 | -.02 |
| Goldthorpe routine middle class | -.02 | -.00 | -.00 | -.00 |
| Goldthorpe petty bourgeois | .32** | .02 | -.43** | -.03 |
| Goldthorpe skilled working class | -.04 | -.00 | .33** | .03 |
| Goldthorpe unskilled working class | -.10 | -.01 | .23* | .02 |
| **Education** (no schooling suppressed) | | | | |
| University degree | -.06 | -.01 | -.09 | -.01 |
| Upper school qualification | .23** | .03 | -.23** | -.03 |
| Lower school qualification | .15* | .02 | -.24** | -.03 |
| Missing | -.54 | -.01 | .03 | .00 |
| ***Ever member of a trade union*** | -.30*** | -.04 | .50*** | .06 |
| **Class identification** (never middle class suppressed) | | | | |
| Middle class (once during panel) | .26** | .03 | -.36*** | -.04 |
| Middle class (twice, during panel) | .49*** | .06 | -.56*** | -.07 |
| ***Economic Problems*** | | | | |
| Frequency economic conditions "now worse" | -.03** | -.02 | .04*** | .03 |
| Problems paying for housing | .02*** | .03 | -.01* | -.02 |
| **Total level of political interest** over all waves | .07*** | .09 | .12*** | .14 |
| ***Ever supported the Conservatives*** | 5.33*** | .77 | | |
| ***Ever supported Labour*** | | | 5.33*** | .73 |
| **Constant** -.53** | | | -1.43*** | |

Entries are OLS regression coefficients, B, followed by the standardized regression coefficients (Beta).
***p <.001 **.001 < p < .01 *.01 < p <.05
Conservatives Model: Adjusted R Square =.68 Standard Error =1.94 F =468.81 Signif F = .0000
Labour Model: Adjusted R Square =.67 Standard Error =2.10 F =377.27 Signif F = .0000

## Table 2B
## The Persistence of Party Support in Germany
## N=2320

| | Frequency of SPD Support | | Frequency of CDU/CSU Support | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor Variables** | **B** | **Beta** | **B** | **Beta** |
| **Gender** (female suppressed) | .250 | .024 | .193 | .019 |
| **Years Married** | 4.239E-02** | .037 | 2.748E-02* | .025 |
| **Age Cohort** (youngest suppressed) | | | | |
| 31-50, | .551** | .052 | .367** | .036 |
| 51 and older | .547** | .044 | .663** | .056 |
| **Religion** (other/no religion suppressed) | | | | |
| Roman Catholic, total over waves when asked | -.164 | -.030 | .328** | .063 |
| Protestant, total over waves when asked | 5.286E-02 | .01 | 5.630E-02 | .011 |
| **Frequency of Church Attendance, total over waves when asked** | -.198** | -.040 | .306*** | .065 |
| **Occupation** (Goldthorpe not working) | | | | |
| Goldthorpe upper service class | -.631* | -.029 | .111 | .005 |
| Goldthorpe lower service class | -.135 | -.010 | -.153 | -.012 |
| Goldthorpe simple office worker | .100 | .005 | .521* | .029 |
| Goldthrope self-employed, 1-20 co-workers | -.555 | -.015 | 1.057** | .029 |
| Goldthorpe self-employed, no co-workers | -.738 | -.013 | .539 | .010 |
| Goldthorpe farmer | -.556 | -.012 | .528 | .012 |
| Goldthorpe foreman/technical worker | -.140 | -.006 | .479 | .023 |
| Goldthrope skilled worker | .408 | .023 | 3.050E-02 | .002 |
| Goldthorpe manual worker | .491* | .029 | .198 | .012 |
| Goldthorpe farm worker | .670 | .007 | .648 | .007 |
| Goldthorpe other non-manual | 1.120** | .031 | -.439 | -.013 |
| **Frequency of Trade Union Membership, total over waves when asked** | .351*** | .072 | -.148** | -.032 |
| **Education** (no school degree suppressed) | | | | |
| Secondary School degree | -.702 | -.064 | -.481 | -.046 |
| Non-classical degree | -1.119 | -.087 | -.321 | -.026 |
| Technical degree | -.701 | -.026 | -.585 | -.023 |
| Academic high school | -.828 | -.048 | -.765 | -.046 |
| Other | .936 | .012 | .875 | .012 |
| ***Economic Problems*** | | | | |
| Job security, average when answered | .298** | .028 | .179 | .018 |
| Economy, average when answered | -.964*** | -.060 | .915*** | .060 |
| **Local political activity, total over all waves** | 5.747E-02** | .031 | 1.739E-02 | .010 |
| **Political interest, total over all waves** | 8.86OE-02*** | .124 | 9.971E-02 | .145 |
| ***Ever supported the SPD*** | 7.342*** | .691 | | |
| ***Ever supported the CDU/CSU*** | | | 7.175*** | .703 |
| **Constant** | -1.127 | | -6.088*** | |

Entries are OLS regression coefficients, B, followed by the standardized regression coefficients (Beta).
***p =.0000 **.00 < p < .05 *.051 < p <.10
SPD Model : Adjusted R Square =.59 Standard Error =3.41 F =114.66 Signif F = .0000
CDU/CSU Model : Adjusted R Square =.60 Standard Error =3.23 F =119.5 Signif F = .0000

**Figure 1a.**

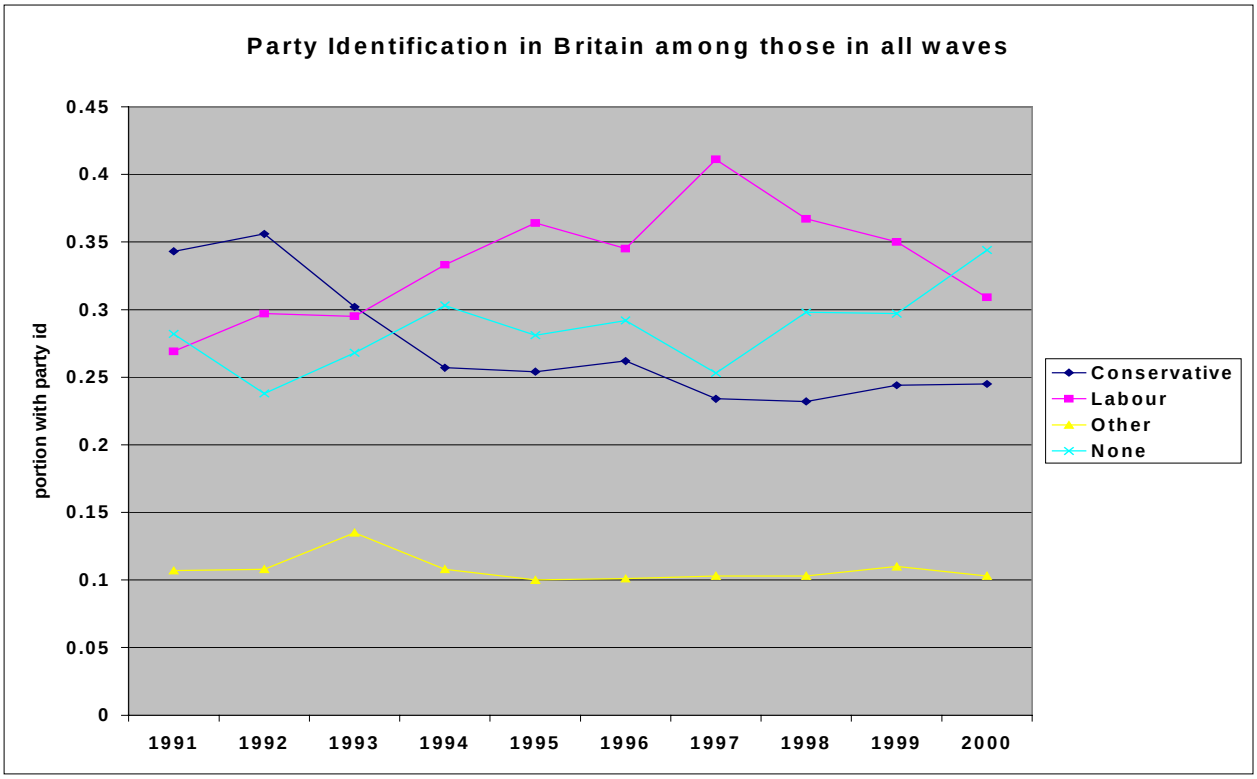



**Figure 1b.**

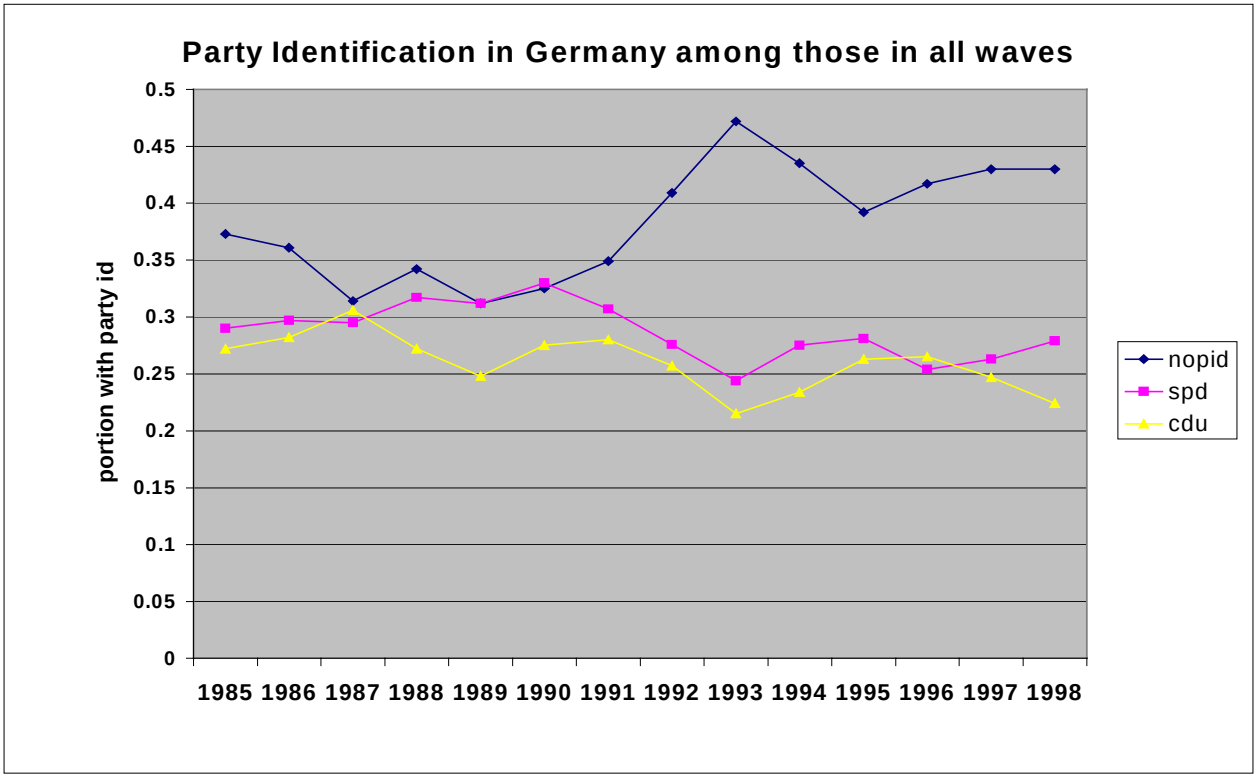


**Figure 2a.**

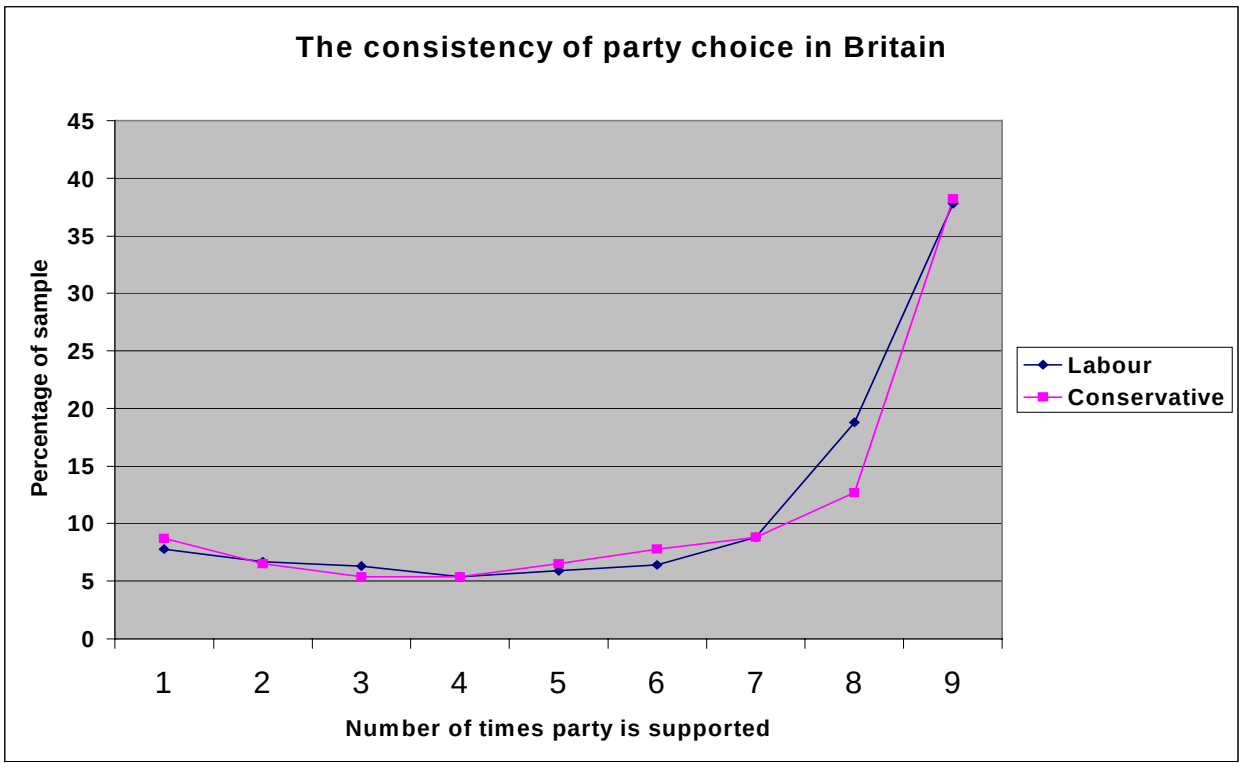



**Figure 2b.**

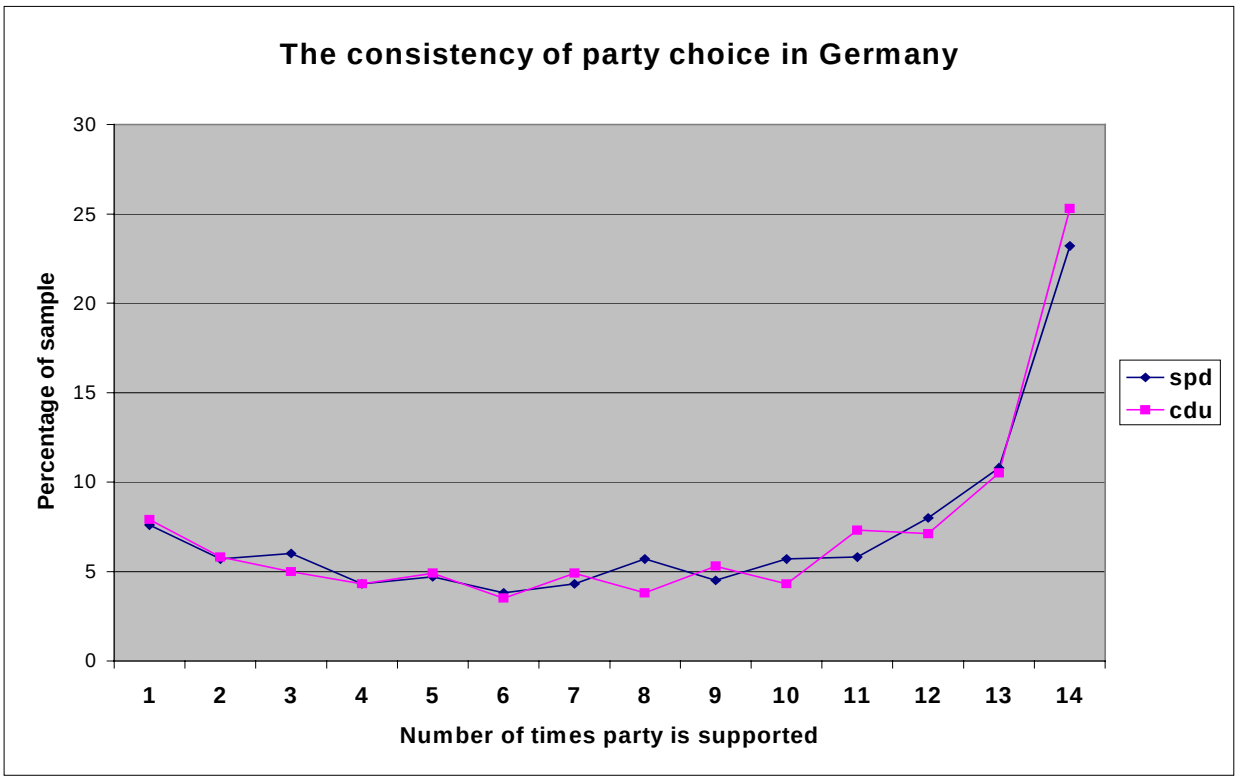


**Figure 3a.**

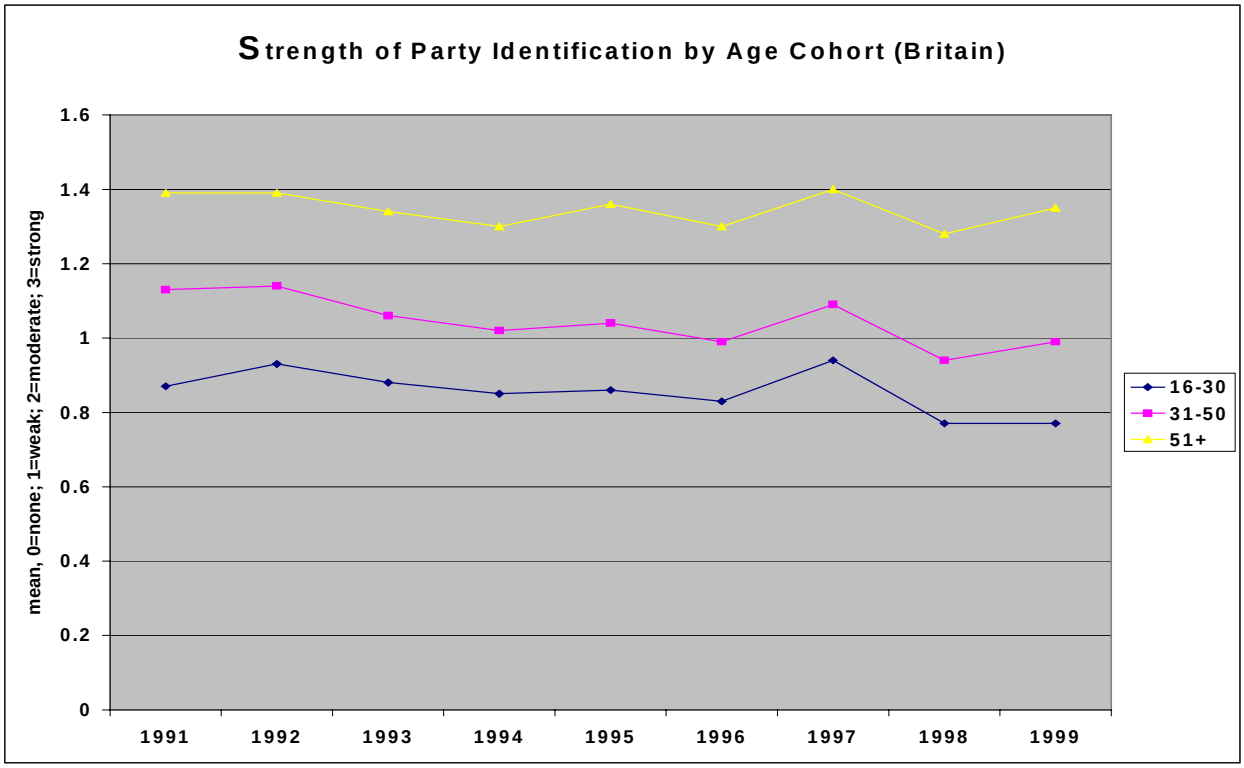
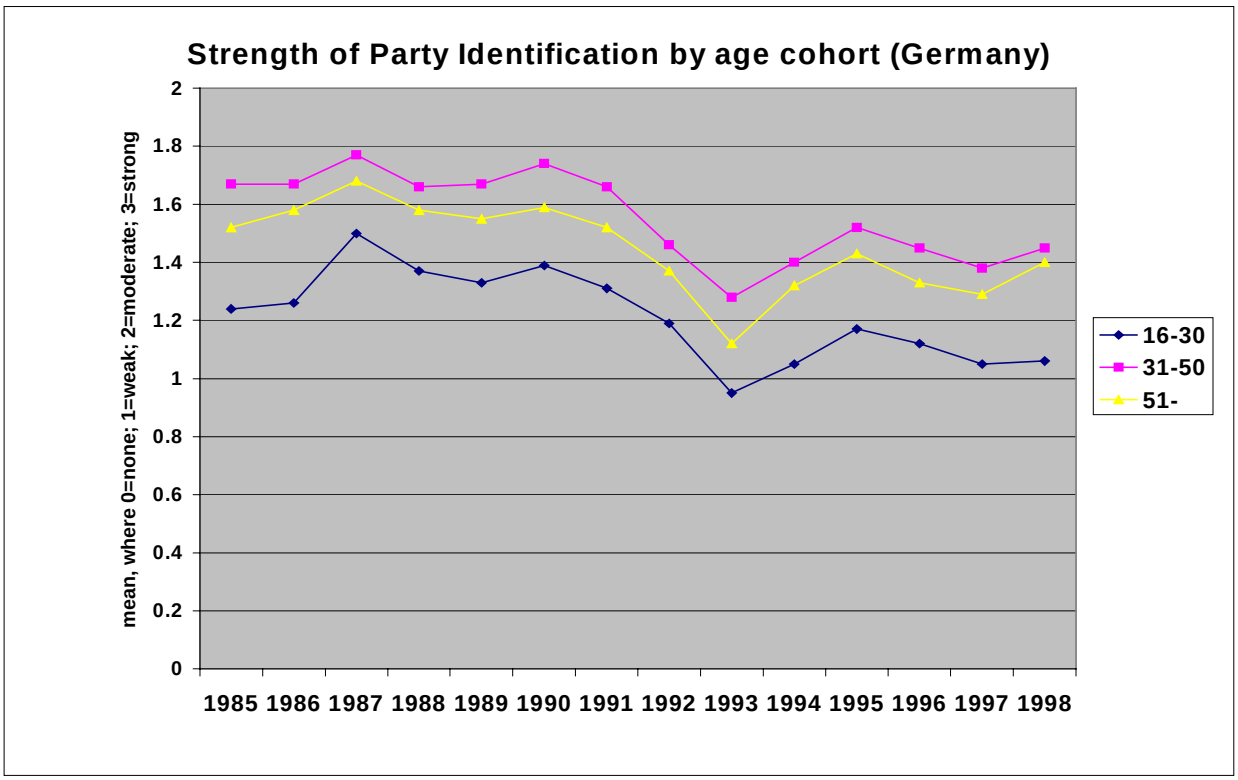



**Figure 3b.**



## Appendix

**Measures for Table 2A, BHPS data**

The categories of occupation come from a constructed variable based on Goldthorpe's conceptualization of objective social class.

Both religion and social class measure self-identification. The following measures religion: "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If Yes. Which?" We collapsed the various options into four categories. The social class questions first asks about identity: "Do you think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class?" A second question offers two options: seven categories of working class and middle class, which we have collapsed into two. The variable measures the number of times during the panel that the respondent claimed to have a middle class identification.

The measure of economic problems taps income issues, by asking whether the respondents have had problems paying for housing and the number of times that they answered that their economic conditions "were now worse."

The following question taps political interest: "How interested would you say you are in politics? Would you say you are: Very interested, fairly interested, not very interested, not at all interested?" This measure awards points for the level of political interest: three for very interested; two for fairly interested; one for not very interested and none for not at all interested.

**Measures for Table 2B, GSOEP data**

The Goldthorpe scale applies here as well as the mode of categorizing objective social class. Economic problems are tapped by two questions: What about the following areas: Do they worry you? if employed, the security of your job? general economic condition? The scale varies among very worried (2 points), slightly worried (1 points), not worried (0 points). Because of problems of multi-collinearity we excluded responses to questions about personal financial circumstances.

Political interested is tapped by two questions: "First of all in general: How interested are you in politics?" Then the respondents are offered the following choices: "Very interested [3 points], fairly interested [2 points], not very interested [1 point], and not interested [0 points]."

Religion is measured by a question that taps "membership in a church or denomination." It allows for five options: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Other Christian, non-Christian, and no religion.

Activity in politics and the frequency of church attendance derive from these questions: Which of the following activities do you do in your free time? going to church, attending other religious events, participation in citizen initiatives, parties, community politics? Please enter how often you practice each activity: each week [3 points]; each month [2 points]; less often [1 point]; never [0 points]."

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